

# Season brings memories of family hunts along Yukon River

by Mimi Thomas

Hunting season is in full swing, and fall is drawing near. I grew up in a small town in Alaska along the Yukon River, and this was always my favorite time of the year. The Yukon is a water highway to residents of the area and an important fish and wildlife habitat to numerous species.

Hunting along the Yukon River is more than a favorite activity; it is a way of life. By this time of year, the family would be preparing to journey by river for the annual hunt, usually in search of a moose or two depending on how many of us had harvest tickets.

Being unofficially excused from school for the first week or so always added to the excitement. Something I've always remembered my uncle saying to us as we sat around a campfire is that "people pay millions to do this." I believed him because it was such a good time, and each year's traditional hunt seemed priceless to us all.

My father was the oldest of six brothers, all of whom grew up in rural Alaska. Their home site was located at the fork of the Grayling River. They grew up in "the woods" learning how to live off the land, including hunting and fishing for food and trapping in the winters. Although the brothers live in other places now, the Grayling River home site is like an annual magnet and a reunion destination for all the family to gather during the hunting season.

These early outdoor experiences greatly influenced my understanding of and reverence for the land and Alaska's wildlife. In part, these experiences are the reason I've become a game warden, choosing wildlife protection as a career. Having lived in rural Alaska, where hunting is a way of life, I've learned a few inside tricks that have given me a better perspective on the local mind-set. I believe this has made me a better officer.

My family has always given me a hard time, saying things like "you became a game warden just to turn us all in; we see how you are." They all have taken their best shot at me regarding my line of work. It's been said that I can no longer go on these hunts, implying that I wouldn't like what I see.

These statements are usually followed with a wink and a smile. I know that deep down they respect my

choice, for I know I haven't regretted it.

It's always puzzled me why so few hunters utilize the meat on the head or some of the organs of big game animals. Probably some of the best parts of a moose are the heart and kidneys. A popular Yukon River recipe is to fry the kidneys up the morning after the hunt with some moose fat and serve them with pancakes.

Other parts of the moose I seldom see used on the Kenai Peninsula are the parts of the head. The meat and the marrow of the jaw bone are a favorite, not to mention the moose nose. Some along the Yukon say the nose is the best part of the moose.

One of the similarities between respected hunters along the Yukon River and those on the Kenai Peninsula is how they take care of their animal after the kill. One of the most important aspects of wildlife conservation in Alaska is the proper salvaging and utilization of edible meat from big game animals and other wildlife. In many ways, modern wildlife regulations reflect the traditional importance of game meat salvage.

Along the Yukon, like other places in Alaska, there is no greater "hunting sin" than leaving a whole animal to waste after shooting it. In fact, most game meat waste cases are successfully prosecuted due to timely reports by other hunters who either witnessed the incident or have information to report. Hunters who otherwise would have little contact with law enforcement make an exception to report the waste of game meat. Although many times we find the kill too late to salvage the meat, a successfully prosecuted waste case serves as an important deterrent to such abuses by hunters.

Many times big game animals are wasted due to lack of knowledge or preparation regarding transporting such a large amount of meat from a remote site. Other times, hunters may be too quick to judge an antler size or configuration, only to find they have shot an illegal animal.

Hunters should remember that fellow hunters and perhaps the magistrate may judge them less harshly for admitting a mistake and taking steps to salvage the edible meat for donation to charitable organizations,

allowing people that need the food to utilize it. The best advice however, is DON'T SHOOT unless you're absolutely sure that you have a legal animal.

Leaving a dirty camp is also a practice that is frowned upon by hunters along the Yukon, and in our family hunting circle, this was not respected or tolerated. Littering Alaska's public lands is like your neighbor littering your back yard. Who wants to begin a hunt or other activity by picking up trash after someone else?

I am the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's representative for the Kenai Peninsula Crime Stopper's program. All law violations can be reported to the pro-

gram, including game violations. The Crime Stopper's telephone line is answered 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It is unrecorded and callers who wish to remain anonymous are not asked or required to identify themselves. The telephone number to call is (907) 283-8477 or toll free anywhere in Alaska at 1-800-478-4258.

Have fun on your hunt. And be safe.

*Mimi Thomas is a law enforcement officer on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*